

Shell of a Man

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Summary: 26 was just an ordinary Combine soldier, but his latest mission goes wrong before it even starts, and in the process he gains what the Combine fight against: Free will.

1. Dropship Down

"ETA to dropzone t-minus 10 minutes."

The pod swayed back, forth and side to side as the dropship maneuvered it's own path through the mountainous terrain. It's cargo pod was held tightly like a child would have with a teddy bear. The pod's own sentry gun scanned the area for any hostile targets. Confident of it's own safety the gun remained silent.

Inside the pod six armoured individuals were seated on either side opposite one another. Five of them belonged to the standard forces of the Sector Seventeen Overwatch, one of the many divisions of the Combine military on Earth. Decked in blue and grey patterned uniforms they were joined by the last soldier garbed in dark red with glowing orange eyes. The menacing skull emblem on his left arm denoted him as a member of the Overwatch Elite.

"Begin mission preparation." the same mechanised voice sounded.

Exchanging quick nods with each other the five standard soldiers reached up above their heads for their helmet masks. The dropship pod could be sealed at any time, and being one of the few moments of inactivity this allowed soldiers to remove their masks briefly alongside their armour. Whilst soldiers could breath without their masks, they could not do so for too long in an exposed environment.

The soldier on the left side at the back looked at his comrades before meeting his eyes with the Elite's goggles.

"StanOp procedures?" he asked, standing for Standard Operation. His voice sounded less mechanical thanks to the absence of his mask, yet still carried a cold and metallic overtone to it.

The Elite soldier shook his head, "Negative 26. Collaboration with five other deployment teams. Vance Sub-Prime believed to be present. Sweep, confirm, cauterize. Non-citizens and enemy collaborators present. No prisoners."

26 gave a short nod of understanding before placing the large mask over his own head. With a resounding 'snap!' the helmet clips locked themselves into place. He allowed his eyes to adjust to the sudden yet familiar change, meanwhile pieces of digital information flickered across his vision.

**MEDICAL STATUS: EXCEPTIONAL **

WEAPON STATUS: UNKNOWN: WIELD STERILIZER APPARATUS

** POWER STATUS: ACCEPTABLE **

APPETITION STATUS: BELOW ACCEPTABLE: RESUPPLY

The large announcements disappeared as quickly as they came, replaced with shortened, smaller versions of themselves in the bottom corners of his vision. Loading a small clip into an MP7, 26 checked his ammo stats again, this time reading "WPN ST: 45".

"ETA to dropzone t-minus 5 minutes" the Elite reported. The squad already knew of their objectives and had served many times together before. Unlike pre-war squads though, there was no chatter of any kind but an eerie observant silence instead. Nothing exclusive to this one squad however. Many members of the Transhuman forces behaved in the same way, an effect of their training.

26 was one of the few exceptions. He'd never question his orders or speak in a way that would clash with his superiors, he'd just comment in regards to a mission or simply ask about what he already knew.

He gave a small sigh "Hope this mission is short, could do with supplement." The Elite stood up and grasped the metal support beam above his head, wielding his shotgun in the other.

"Prepare for visual download of Vance Sub-Prime."

26 nodded in unison with the others and stood as well. In seconds the image of a young woman in her early twenties flashed within his mind thanks to the augmentations soldiers received. It felt as though he had seen her in person before, if asked he could easily describe her. Asian American female, early twenties, African American heritage donning a torn leather jacket over a hooded jumper and slight worn casual jeans.

"Ready weapons and prep for con-"

The pod rocked violently as something impacted itself into it.

* * *

><p>The dropship began it's rocky descent towards a small wooden

settlement surrounded by a thick forest and only accessible from a little dirt path. Unbeknownst to the pod's occupants a number of resistance members amassed and lay in wait.<p>

"I hear one of them now!" a young rebel cried, eagerly shouldering an RPG.

"Easy!" called another, an older man in his forties. "Wait until they get a little closer, we need them in range."

Several bodies made their way to various points around the decrepit building and took up their positions.

"Yeah, come closer you sons of bitches" the first rebel muttered. The noise of the dropship grew louder and louder as it made it's way closer to them. One of the rebels, a woman dressed in pre-war clothing tore across from the building to the small wall surrounding it and slid next to the older man.

"What are you still doing here?" he inquired gruffly, equipping a pair of binoculars. Cautiously he peered over the wall towards the horizon above the trees and grimaced.

"They'll be here any minute Miss Vance, you need to get going."

"I can't leave you guys without help Pieter!" she retorted indignantly. From within her jacket she withdrew some kind of prototype handgun.

The older man shook his head. Her heart was in the right place, she held a fierce determination to help and protect her friends and under any other circumstance he'd be glad to have her along. But he knew better than that, she was a key member of the Resistance. Without her...

"You need to go now!" he turned to face her and added quietly "Alyx, your father needs you. The data you're holding is vital, and you're the only one who can get it to him."

Alyx shook her head, "I can't leave..."

He placed his hands upon her shoulders and looked her in the eyes. _'Still young yet stubborn, just like her father'_ he thought.

"Alyx, this whole thing will be full of hardships and tragedy I won't deny that, but you keep strong and stay determined and no matter what is thrown at you you'll make it through and those who haven't will be able to rest at last." The droning of the dropship rumbled throughout the woods and nearly drowned out his words. He dove into his pocket and handed over a small green vial.

"I know you can do this Alyx, now go!"

"But..."

"They're nearly here, go! That's an order!"

She hesitated, but then gave him a small hug. "I won't forget about you."

His frown softened and a small smile emerged, "Ditto."

Alyx gave a little smile of her own before retreating back into the building and leaving out the other side. Pieter sighed in apprehension as the sight of a dropship entered into his view. He quickly grabbed a nearby RPG.

"Get ready to fire!"

* * *

><p>The soldiers held on for dear life while the pod shook dangerously with each hit from a rocket. The sound of the pod's automated turret returning fire filled the air and the cries of the dropship echoed in their ears.<p>

"Outbreak outbreak outbreak!" the Elite shouted, his fingers desperately clutching the support beam above. His gun was quickly knocked out of his grip. Just as he reached it the door of the pod was suddenly wrenched off from it's hinges by a direct hit. The Elite lost his balance and fell out of the pod.

"Shit!" cried 26 dropping his gun in favour of holding his own support with both hands. Several of his comrades followed suit whilst another joined the Elite. The dropship groaned, it's strength and determination weakening with every hit, spinning out of control. A sudden jolt of electricity surged through 26's head as a power unit next to him burst with a fiery display and collapsed to the floor with a crash.

"Urgh!" he moaned and barely felt the pod falling through the air as his world faded to black.

* * *

><p>"Are you sure this is necessary?" _laughed the young man from behind a blindfold. The woman beside him giggled softly and gently squeezed his arm._

"Silly, of course it is necessary" she teased. "Otherwise I know you would sneak just a teensie weensie peek. And that would ruin the surprise."

"What surprise? You mean you got me that car I've always wanted?" he asked hopefully with a tone of humour.

"Even if I did I wouldn't tell you."

_"Aw come on..." he playfully whined, realising he was entering his living room.

>

"A little further...ok you can look now."

"Taking off the blindfold he was met with the sight of all his closest friends and relatives. He couldn't help the big smile that spread across his face.

"Happy Birthday!"

* * *

><p>With an immediate jolt of pain throughout his body 26 woke from his forced slumber. His stats flickered slightly as he came to, all of them dangerously low. Another stab of pain shocked his head.<p>

He hissed through clenched teeth. "Ah fuck!" He couldn't see anything other than his own stats and felt a constant pressure on his back. Fumbling around his head he realised the back of his helmet had melted, exposing the shaven head underneath.

Disorientated and confused he lay motionless under the sheet of metal, not even bothering to look up at his surroundings.

What am I doing here? he quietly pondered and lifted up his head. What met his sight was terrifying.

A single body of an young man, around the age of 18 lay in before him, staring up at him with unforgiving dead eyes with an expression of terror set onto his face, a cry cut off with a single headshot. 26's memories of past assignments came flooding back to him. Those slain by his own hand, each and every one of them clear in his mind, their cries and pleas echoing inside his mind.

"_Please no! God no!"_

"Don't kill me! I'm unarm-"

"Why are you doing this? Please no!"

_"Nooooo!"
>

It terrified him, it frightened him to experience such feelings. Pain, an immense sorrow that pierced his entire being. He wanted to curl up into a ball and scream, to shut off this new yet strangely familiar feeling of free thought.

It wasn't long though before 26 regained himself and summoned the strength to remove the sheet of metal pinning him down. It toppled off with an almighty crash, reverberating throughout the surrounding forest. Blinking several times he noticed his eye pieces had been damaged so badly he couldn't see more than a few feet in front of him.

Hesitantly he reached up behind his mask, before grabbing both sides. He took a couple of deep breaths before continuing, unsure of the consequences. Finally after what felt like hours he earned the confidence to remove it.

* * *

><p>Well this is it so far. I really hope this story is interesting enough for at least one person. I find Combine soldiers fascinating and wonder what if one developed free will again? I want to thank BlindAcquiescence, his story Behind the Mask inspired me to finally get the idea of a Combine regaining free will and the aftermath of it written down. Please review and feel free to give

constructive criticism.

2. Shelter from the Storm

The air assaulted his face as he pulled the helmet from off his head. The experience felt completely alien to him and he shielded his eyes from the piercing rays of the sun. The air painfully stabbed his lungs, forcing him onto his knees.

"Ah shit!" he hacked and violently coughed. He hastily replaced the helmet and took several deep breaths before removing it once again. Multiple times he repeated the process until after 10 minutes he finally allowed his head to remain free of the shroud he'd worn for so long. 26 looked around him, witnessing the aftermath of the carnage.

What used to be an old wooden house had largely become a giant woodpile, a single dropship on top of it the cause of it's demolition. Scattered across the surrounding area lay the bodies of rebels and fellow soldiers alike, the debris and death covering the ground like a morbid blanket.

It was strange. He didn't feel they were his comrades at all, rather they were masked abominations, alien and hostile. His curiosity began to heighten with all kinds of thoughts running through his mind at the sight of them. Ignoring the logical thought of retreating to a safer location he reached down to a fallen soldier and pulled off the mask. A pair of wide, blank eyes met his own.

With a sudden cry he leapt backwards at the sight of his comrade's naked head. His breathing became rapid once again, his hands began to shake uncontrollably. Slowly, when he realised there was truly no way the soldier was still alive he calmed himself down and took a closer inspection of the body.

The soldier's face had become a deathly pale with sunken in eyes and almost invisible lips. Where there should have been hair was merely several prominent scars. The irises in his eyes did not possess the healthy colours that the rebels had, instead they were a very light grey with cloudy pupils. Peering at the neck 26 could see an odd device lodged within the throat where the larynx should have been. Unconsciously 26 felt his own neck, his thoughts still partially scrambled.

"Oh dear God...what has happened to me..."

"Overwatch, requesting Airwatch support," called the familiar mechanised voice. _"Possible hostiles inbound."_

Without so much as a backwards glance 26 rushed around the ruins of the house and into the heavy forest behind it. Dodging and weaving through he didn't stop for any breath, his augmentations allowed him to run faster and far longer than the average human being. He didn't want to be found by the Overwatch unmasked. In fact, he didn't want to be found at all.

Gradually he slowed his pace and took cover by a dead tree stump. He reached into his backpack and retrieved a small, black USP Match. Unlike the weaker variants wielded by Civil Protection officers,

Overwatch pistols possessed a greater power accompanied by a stronger sound as they fired.

His combat instincts took over as he slid a magazine into place and carefully observing around he saw no one in sight, nor could his enhanced hearing pick up anything but the sounds of the forest. His hands tight on the pistol grip he scanned the area up ahead as something caught his eye.

Checking once more that the area was clear, 26 moved with precision from cover to cover towards a decrepit cottage which lay in the process of being absorbed by Mother Nature, effectively hiding the majority of it. Peeking through a dusty old window he could see it had laid empty for years, it's owners long gone. He then noticed his own faint reflection. Wiping with his hand he managed to see himself more clearly.

Looking back at him was the familiar sight of pale skin yet with small differences. Unlike the soldier he'd unmasked before his own face was much less gaunt, his own eyes still retained a small measure of colour, a very pale green. Covering his scalp was a thin layer of grey hair with occasional spots of brown, kept shaven at a very short length. He stared intensely at himself for what seemed like hours, before a loud crash brought his attention up.

He exhaled at the sight of the dark clouds. The thunder soon followed what he knew had been lightning, he soon found a door which with a bit of grunting and pushing managed to open, groaning in protest as it did. He pushed it to rather than completely closed it. His body ached with fatigue, he hadn't had any energy supplement for nearly 5 hours.

Ahead of him a doorway lay broken, the room behind it filled with earth and stone from a cave in. To his right were two doors along a tiny corridor, the window at the end providing barely any amount of light. The first door he tried refused to budge, as if locked from within. Not interested in using any more strength he tried the second door which was already open.

Stepping into a small bedroom he found the window in the room was completely covered by plantation, yet thankfully had not managed to breach the glass. An old metal frame stood underneath it, holding a very worn and used mattress. 26 looked at the small column at the end of the bed and sighed to himself before resting himself against it. He heard the gentle patter of the rain as he drifted off to sleep, too tired to give a thought to anything.

* * *

><p>"Damn it," cursed Alyx aloud to herself. The few rebels that had accompanied her had become separated during the assault, the fact she didn't know the area particularly well was starting to swell panic within her.<p>

"Ok ok, let's just think about this, you've been through worse before," she told herself. "Just need to remember...where I arrived from..."

Mentally she swore again. Surrounded by the same trees and undergrowth she couldn't gain any information on where she was

headed.

'Great, it can only get better though right?'

A crack of lightning overhead contradicted her, followed by a heavy downpour of rain. Alyx muttered under her breath and jogged forward through the underbrush. Thunder and lightning continued to erupt above alongside the falling rain which poured relentlessly.

She then noticed an odd shape in a mound of earth up ahead in the distance. Upon closer inspection she discovered it was a cottage of sorts. Noticing no sign of habitation by either refugees or the Combine she peered through one of the windows.

_'No one home,'_she thought, then stopped suddenly. Despite being dusty, it looked like it had been recently wiped. Slowly she retrieved the small prototype pistol from inside her jacket and approached the door.

Her grip intensified as she saw it opened slightly, and judging from the marks made on the floor it was recent. She quietly pushed it open, sliding inside before closing it as much as possible. To her immediate left was another open door to an old bathroom, and to her right was a kitchen. The room she was in was probably once a living room by her guess, a worn sofa lay in front of a cracked television in the corner to her left, faintly baring a brand name she couldn't understand. Another door lay behind the sofa was blocked by a small cave in, no doubt to the overgrowing vegetation.

Finally, just ahead of her leading to the right was a little corridor with only two doors, one closed and the other ajar. Alyx swallowed and approached with caution, her finger never straying too far away from the trigger. Carefully she pushed the door further open and she braced herself as she stepped in. She slapped a hand across her mouth to stop herself from gasping at her latest discovery.

Sitting against a brick column was an Overwatch soldier, but unlike any other she'd ever set eyes upon. The distinct hellish mask that all soldiers wore was missing, displayed instead was a very pale man who eerily looked in his mid twenties. Curiously he also looked as though he was much older, his face worn and aged with fatigue.

'Wait, is that even possible?'she wondered to herself.

Looking at him again, she noticed an odd metallic object lodged in his throat. An overwhelming urge to take a closer look at him overtook her senses to stay back. She placed her pistol back into her coat and holding her breath she crouched down in front of him, hearing his own soft breathing as she did. Her hand had only begun to stretch out to the strange object when the soldier's eyes suddenly snapped open

* * *

><p>The dropship pod was quiet save for the muffled sound of the Synth's engines. Across from 26 sat two Overwatch soldiers. Having had a better service record the Overwatch had promoted him to field leader. Adjusting his own weapon's sights, an MP7, 26 began the briefing.

_ "Mission is recon primarily until further instruction," he paused before continuing. "Dropzone is a small landing dock leading into the complex." The squad had been rushed to a dropship from a patrol, he had only just received the orders himself._

_ One of the other soldiers, an AR2 gunner shifted. "What's the target destination?"_

_ "A mountain base built into an old water processing facility located near a former Resistance town." he replied. Although during missions soldiers used the Combine's medical terminology, they tended not to use them so much when conversing before or after a mission, unlike their Elite bretheren._

_ "Overwatch have lost contact with the installation there, they believe cells of the town's Resistance have managed to take out the troops stationed and some of the complex. A recon team was sent a month ago but hasn't reported back. We'll be one of several recon teams inserted to assess the situation before reinforcements are sent."_

_ There was brief moment of silence before the third soldier, also wielding an MP7 spoke up. "Hasn't the area been shelled?" he asked, referring to the headcrab artillery shells used against the Resistance._

_ 26 shook his head "The town nearby has been shelled again but the majority of the area is within the mountain. Any shells that passed through may not have been effective. Given that the area has been shelled in the past though, we're to assume a significantly larger than usual number of necrotics and parasitics."_

_ Seemingly satisfied with the answer the soldier just nodded once before loading his weapon. The piercing noise of the pod's alarm rang out and the three of them got to their feet._

_ "Prep for landing in t-minus 30 seconds..."_

* * *

><p>26 suddenly woke from his slumber, met by the immediate sight of a Resistance member reaching for his neck. Reacting on instinct he wrapped his left hand around her wrist whilst aiming his sidearm with the other.<p>

"Who are you!" he yelled, through gritted teeth, "What are you doing!"

The young woman froze in fear, unable to speak. 26 observed the clothing she was wearing and frowned further. It wasn't the typical citizen attire of a blue jumpsuit or the rebel gear worn by the Resistance. A torn leather jacket hastily repaired with duct tape worn over a white hooded jumper, bearing a strange logo captioned with the words 'Black Mesa'.

'Pre-War clothing,' he thought, then stopped as realisation clicked into place. "You're the Vance Sub-Prime," he uttered.

"That's Miss Vance to you!" she sneered regaining her confidence. "Let go of me!"

Without thinking he released her instantly, lowering his gun slightly but kept his guard up. Aware of this the woman took several steps back, but didn't attempt to retrieve her own sidearm.

"You...let me go?" she said, more in confusion than actually asking. 26 slumped back against the column, looking tired.

"Look, I just... just want to be left alone." he said sighing. "I'm not going to do anything to you."

Puzzled, she decided to try and press forward "Why?"

He turned his head sideways, showing her the burn marks on the back of his head. "After this happened...I don't know, I just began thinking."

Alyx was throughly confused. Over the years she'd heard all about the soldiers of the Overwatch, people who gave up their own memories and will to become advanced killing machines with no compassion, no remorse, incapable of possessing any individuality at all. Yet right now she stood across from one, who not only didn't wear a mask but had seemingly spared her and even spoke with a voice that sounded more human than mechanical.

'It could be a trick,' the voice in her head told her._ 'He's waiting for the chance to take you out.'_

She hastily took a few paces back out the room and quickly pulled her sidearm out. "You think I'm that stupid? I'm not falling for it, you're just waiting for your chance to attack!" she accused defiantly.

26 just closed his eyes, "No." he said quietly, a little aware of a strange scratching noise nearby.

"Well I don't believe you, you try and follow me I'll shoot you," she finished, turning just as a decomposed arm shot through the first locked door, followed by a body.

26 leapt up and ran to the corridor only to witness the young woman being pushed against the wall by the ragged zombie, holding her hand across her face whilst desperately attempting to push the zombie backwards.

"Get down!" he shouted. As she dropped to the floor he squeezed the trigger in rapid succession, each shot impacting the bulbous shape of the parasite atop the zombie's head and gaining it's attention. After the sixth shot the gun jammed.

"Hang on!"

Without any hesitation 26 leapt for the emaciated creature, knocking it down in a rough tackle. Grabbing one of the headcrab's legs he savagely ripped it off of the zombie's head and fiercely jabbed at it relentlessly with his fists. After several minutes the creature finally became just as still and silent as it's host. The only sounds left were the heavy downpour outside and his own heavy breathing.

After checking the previously locked room (which was partially caved in due to a single headcrab shell) and confident there was no more threat to them 26 walked over to Alyx, holding out a gloved hand.

"Are you alright?"

In a small shaky voice she answered "Why did you do that?"

26 sat down beside her, "Because it was the right thing to do I guess. I couldn't let that thing just tear you apart."

"That thing was once a person!" she said angrily, "Until your Combine decided he deserved to be zombified!"

26 didn't respond at first, ignoring the urge to mention it had tried to kill her. After a minute he said quietly, "I was once a person too."

Her expression softened at his words, and for a moment she felt a little sympathy for him. He hadn't yet shown any hostility towards her, and of course he had just saved her life.

"I'll move them back into that room and seal it," he said standing up. "I think it's nearly dark anyway, not that the weather would help at all. You can have the mattress, I'll keep watch."

He cleared the jam in his handgun and holstered it using the straps on his vest. As he bent to pick up the headcrab Alyx got to her feet and gave him a long look.

"What's your name?" she asked finally.

He turned and replied, "I don't know," then added "Twenty six. Yours?"

"Alyx."

26 gave a quick nod. "Nice to meet you," he said a little awkwardly. Both of them, unsure of how to proceed stood in silence.

"Thank you," spoke Alyx.

"For what?"

Alyx just gave a small smile, "Showing some humanity."

26 gave her a faint smile of his own before picking up the zombie's body, while Alyx returned to the other room and after considering how grimy the mattress looked decided to just ignore it and collapsed onto it, falling asleep within seconds.

After clearing the bodies and blocking up the zombie's room, 26 sat down on the old sofa, thinking about his new friend.

* * *

><p>Finally a new chapter, I nearly gave up on this story but I'm satisfied with this chapter. I hope you guys enjoyed it and please, do comment! The flashback is a reference to a favourite Half

Life 2 mod of mine, cookies for those who know which one!

3. The Next Day

"What the hell is that?"

"Don't think just shoot the fucking thing!"

"What's the point...it does nothing! I'm out of here!"

"Jones get back here! JONES!"

"They're dead! Come on, we have to go, NOW! I got you buddy, I got you..."

"LOOK OUT!"

* * *

><p>The voices faded as quickly as they had arrived, leaving a strong impact within 26's mind in their wake. He sat up, noticing the downpour continuing outside. The evening sky had also progressed into darkness during his slumber, and judging from the lack of gunfire, the Overwatch forces from earlier had either overlooked the small ruins or hadn't bothered searching.<p>

26 picked himself up from the ruined sofa, quietly stumbling to the bathroom near the entrance. The electricity had long been off, so he relied upon a small augmentation in his eyes to penetrate the dark. He entered the small room and looked upon his own reflection in the opposite mirror, which was somehow still intact.

Staring back was a ghostly image of himself, amplified by a subtle blue glow caused by his nightvision. The longer he stared the more questions filled his head, tormenting him with a lack of answers. He was more than just this, he could feel that there was more to him than he knew, but kept out of his reach.

He had stood there for nearly an hour before returning to the living room, though he didn't feel tired enough nor was he inclined to go back to sleep. Instead, he worked his way to the bedroom where he and one of the most wanted Resistance members had met, and nearly fought one another only hours before. 26 didn't enter but looked in the room. The young woman, who had called herself Alyx sat against the end of the bed, her arms wrapped around her legs and her head resting on her knees.

The mission he had started earlier flashed in his mind, only this time he was able to think about the details and react in his own ways to them, rather than blindly accepting them. In a few moments he had gone from one of many mindless Combine soldiers to someone able to think for themselves.

For the rest of the night he thought hard about every mission he had participated in and every kill he had made. sitting on the sofa in silence up until the early hours of the morning. He barely registered the sound of Alyx approaching him from behind.

"You're still awake," she commented, a little surprised.

"Yeah, couldn't sleep."

She stared at him for a moment before sitting down next to him, making sure to keep some distance. "Are you ok?" she asked. 26 turned, giving her a tired glance.

"Not really." he admitted. He kept looking at his own hands, which had been splattered with yellow and red blood from the scuffle before.

"It will never come off."

Alyx raised a brow, "Washing them would work."

"That's not what I meant...I have more than that on my hands," he replied softly, then added hesitantly "I don't know what to do now."

She walked over to the window, peering out for any signs of the Combine. "What do you want to do?" she asked, looking back at him.

26 shook his head but gave a faint smile, "That's also something I don't know, but I do know I never want to go back to _them_." he said bitterly.

Why not invite him to join us? Alyx's mind pondered.

No, it was a crazy idea. He might have saved her life the previous night, but he was still one of the Combine. And yet, he wasn't. The very idea of a Combine soldier saving a Resistance member's life was absurd, yet she herself had witnessed it and discovered the fact this one was thinking for himself, expressing a desire to forever leave the Combine. The more she thought about it, the less plausible it seemed that he was a spy. The Combine, for all it's ruthlessness didn't tend to use espionage. It was only the actual human collaborators who tended to carry out such activities.

Before she could ask him his head twitched up. He quickly drew his pistol and ducked down beside the window, signalling her to do the same.

"Cover! Incoming hostiles!" he hissed. Alyx strained to hear anything but was met only with the sounds of the waking forest.

"I don't hear anything," she whispered, crouching opposite him.

"Their...our equipment makes a distinct sound when we move. There's at least two out there, most likely hunting down any survivors."

"Were there any?" she asked hopefully after a moment. 26 closed his eyes briefly, gently shaking his head.

"I think I was the only one. Your friends, and my fr-squad mates did not make it."

He turned his focus back outside yet could see Alyx covering her face with her palms from the corner of his eye, clearly devastated. He felt a pang of what might have been guilt, and wondered if he should say something, but couldn't bring himself to try. He didn't know what to say, or whether he had any right to say it at all. Instead he chose silence, listening for anymore of his former allies. Soon, the sound of the distant soldiers died away, though he still remained on edge.

"We should go," he told her. "I think they're gone, but it's not safe here."

26 looked towards her and sighed quietly. He retrieved a small, metallic package from his backpack, marked with CMB SUPPACKAGE. It looked almost like a pre-war drinks carton, minus the straw. He held it out to Alyx, who looked at it questioningly.

"It's supplement." he offered, "Food. It won't harm you, Civil Protection squads use them too."

Alyx gingerly accepted it, wiping her reddened eyes. "What's it taste like?"

26 gave a shrug, "Like shit." he told her bluntly, to which she reluctantly chuckled. He took out another one for himself, eating only half. He replaced it in his backpack then inspected his sidearm before offering it to Alyx.

"Take it."

Alyx pulled out her own weapon, "I've got one already."

"But it's empty." he commented. Alyx regarded him suspiciously.

"How do you-"

"When you aimed at me last night," said 26. "I could tell it wasn't loaded. Your eyes gave it away."

Slowly Alyx stretched her hand out and gave his hand a slight push. "I can't." she declined.

"You can't go unarmed." he said. "What ammunition does your steri-...pistol take?" She revealed to him that it took the same ammo as his own weapon, to which he held out several magazines in return insistently.

"Take them."

Alyx saw he wasn't going to give up, so accepted the ammunition offered and loaded her gun. It wouldn't fire as many rounds as usual, but at least she was able to protect herself. 26 directed his gaze outside again, vigilantly scanning for further threats.

"You should probably go now," he said as he concentrated on the trees.

"What about you?"

"Haven't you already asked me this question?" reminded 26. He truely

had no idea of what he wanted to do, though trying to answer the many questions inside his mind were a start. _Who am I really?_ being the top one.

Alyx had been thinking about him throughout the early morning in silent debate with herself. Now, she finally came to a decision, one she hoped she wouldn't regret later on.

"Want to come with me?" _Please be the right choice_ she prayed mentally.

26 looked mildly startled, "You want me...to join you? But I'm a...I'm a..."

"Yes, and you saved my life." she finished simply. "No Combine has ever done that, let alone speak to me."

"In that case then," he continued, getting to his feet. "Let me go first." He didn't vocally express to her it was his way of gaining further trust from her. He was fully aware that she probably distrusted him for the most part, his saving of her life and her own curiosity in regards to his individuality being the only factors keeping her from shooting him. By choosing to lead the way he was effectively telling her _"I'm here, so if I make a move you can shoot me."_

Alyx holstered her gun, "I don't know where I am actually. I'm not familiar with this area." she admitted. 26 took a few steps towards the front door, pistol at the ready. A strange desire to laugh erupted within him but was firmly held in check thanks to his training.

"That makes two of us then."

* * *

><p>The pair had been wondering the expansive woods for what seemed like hours. The sounds of the forest's many inhabitants gave off a soothing chorus, only interrupted by the occasional sounds of distant Dropships passing from time to time. After having yet another debate upon passing the same certain tree for the fifth time, the duo had finally agreed to locate the site of the ill-fated rebel camp in attempts to find a map. Having a better memory thanks to the neurological upgrades the Combine had forced upon him, 26 began tracing his own steps back, constantly on alert for any Combine activity.<p>

"You do realise the camp may still be occupied." he warned her as they drew near. Alyx disregarded his comment with a handwave.

"The local resistance leader Pieter had a map of this area," explained Alyx, "which I wasn't able to get on my way out."

Before 26 could ask her anything else he dropped behind a fallen log and Alyx did the same. "What do you see?" she asked.

26 peered over the log and observed the site of the former Resistance base. The fires that had engulfed the fallen dropship had long been extinguished, but the smell of death lingered in the air covering the area. The bodies of both Overwatch personnel and members of the

Resistance remained scattered across the demolished house's grounds.

Inside, 26 felt a cold sweat break out all over. He felt sick at the sight of the bloody skirmish, the soldier he'd unmasked before was strong in his mind. He cleared his throat and looked at Alyx, who's face had contorted into one of subdued rage and sorrow.

"No..." she uttered in shock. "No no no...they can't..." she choked out before silently sobbing to herself. 26 stopped seeking out any signs of the enemy and began searching for the man called Pieter, who Alyx had described to him not long before. Reluctantly he made himself look at all the bodies and deep down he found it easier to look at the dead Combine than to gaze upon the frozen looks of pain and terror upon the faces of the rebels. Finally after 10 minutes of searching Alyx's small voice called him over to the corpse of an older man which, judging from the second body underneath him, had died trying to protect a comrade.

Carefully 26 pulled him off of the dead rebel and gently laid him on the ground. His gray eyes stared endlessly at the pair, almost accusingly in a strange sort of way. Respectfully, 26 knelt down beside him and ran his fingers over his eyes, closing them.

"I'm sorry."

"Who to?" Alyx asked.

"You, to him, to all those who are here-and always will be."

His eyes fell upon a piece of paper jutting out of Pieter's jacket and after another apology retrieved it. It was an old map, dated back to the 1980s written in Russian. As part of the Combine technology embedded within his head, the words were easily translated. He pointed to each spot on the map to Alyx, reading them out as he did so.

"This X here is hand drawn, so I'm guessing it's where we are currently. There's deep forest all around and only a few roads. There's also a small village to the south, a radio tower to the northwest and a series of hills to the north called the Bare Rocks."

Alyx jabbed her finger at the last one, "Bare Rocks? Is there anything else there?"

"Nothing marked on the map," he replied, "Is that where you're supposed to be heading?"

"I've been staying at an old Soviet silo base by the same name for the past month, I've not travelled this far from it before." she explained. 26 examined the map closely, looking for any signs that could indicate a military facility to the right person. After several minutes he tapped a finger at a small opening on the west of the hills.

"There, that's got to be it. It's not far from a marked military depot and is close to the radio tower. Anything on there that you might have seen before?"

"Yes!" she cried, "I've been to that depot once before, I recognise the road leading to it as well." She looked towards Pieter again and fought to keep her tears back. She'd known him for a long time ever since her father Eli Vance, a notable leader of the Resistance first moved to the outskirts of City 17. Pieter had been a close friend to her, protecting her on missions, standing up for her whenever she was unfairly challenged and even taught her some of the mechanical skills she possessed in their spare time. Seeing him lie motionless before her stabbed her with jolts of guilt, threatening to overwhelm her. She felt a hand lightly press on her shoulder.

"We need to go now," 26 told her a little awkwardly. His comment wasn't intended to upset her, but upon hearing it her tears began again and she clutched at Pieter's fallen form. 26 gently pulled her away from him after a couple of minutes, and helped her up. "Come on," he told her softly, "We need to go."

"I'm sorry," she sniffed. "You're right, let's go."

With one last glance, she silently bid her old friend goodbye and followed 26 through the thick foliage. For the next several hours they followed the map as closely as possible, backtracking several steps every so often whenever they'd lose their way. Within 3 hours they reached their ultimate destination, a small unmarked path leading into a cave in the hillside. As they entered, the cave gradually grew wider and seemingly longer and longer. 26 noticed up ahead a wall of steel and wooden boards, clearly made by the Resistance, the path leading up to it lit up by powerful spotlights. In the middle of it was a large single panel of metal attached to ropes designed to be lifted by pullies on both sides. Upon it were two sentries in salvaged Civil Protection armour worn over their blue boiler suits, both armed with old Russian rifles. Thanks to the darkness that still sheltered them they hadn't yet noticed him nor Alyx, who had grabbed his hand.

"You better let me go first, or they'll shoot you on sight." she warned. 26 nodded and gestured for her to lead the way. She gave a sharp distinctive whistle, clearly startling the guards. The one on the left nearly dropped his weapon in surprise and called out.

"Alyx is that you? Goddamn it you daft woman, don't you sneak up on us like that!" he yelled indignantly. He was younger than her by a few years and was known for his rough goatee and immature attitude. The other man, an older, more rotund man with a thick mustache and red hat said nothing, simply choosing to observe the exchange.

"Yes Stanley, not many people would know that particular tune now would they?" she answered matter of factly. "I need to speak with Bailey, I have vital data for him to decrypt." She was of course talented with decryption herself, but only when using her special multitool device she always carried with her. The data packet she possessed couldn't be opened without special equipment, and Bailey was the best technician within the base.

Stanley spat upon the ground. "Well shit, I guess we'll have to let you in, we can't keep the princess outside forever can we Harris?"

Harris sniggered, "Her father wouldn't be pleased about that would he? He'd hobble over here and surely give us two a lesson we'd never

forget!"

Alyx rolled her eyes as they burst out laughing. She'd known these two since they'd escaped from City 17 years ago and had annoyed her on many occasions since. In fact, they had travelled with her from her father's laboratory dubbed Black Mesa East to the Bare Rocks missile base, something that she had tried arguing with her father against in a futile attempt to ditch the pair. Though talented with electronics and mechanics respectively, Stanley and Harris' assignment as permanent sentries outside the base showed the majority of the inhabitants shared her pain.

"I have a friend with me also, don't shoot him." she instructed, "Stay with me 26 and don't make any sudden movements" she whispered. 26 did as instructed and followed her until he was lit up by the floodlights. Upon sight of him the sentries lifted their weapons up in horror.

"What the fuck!" snarled Stanley. He refused to lower his aim, as did Harris. "Are you out of your mind?"

"He saved my life out there, if it wasn't for him I wouldn't be here right now. Lower your weapons, don't shoot. He'll be my responsibility." she added.

Thankfully after a moment the pair lowered their weapons, albeit very slowly and didn't fully point them away. "The Major's not going to let him stay here."

"Yeah, she'll grease him herself and to be honest I wouldn't fuckin' blame her either. Who knows how dangerous he is."

Alyx reaffirmed her authority, "Don't you worry about the Major, you just let us in got it?"

"It's your ass, but you better keep him under control," called Harris. Stanley simply opted for muttering under his breath as they pulled the ropes, opening the makeshift gate. Revealed behind it was a pair of large steel doors marked with Russian, which 26 read as "Bare Rocks ICBM Launch Facility". The codes to open them were changed daily, so Stanley and Harris accompanied them as two other sentries relaxing nearby took their place, regarding 26 with mixed looks of hatred and shock as they passed.

Upon entering the facility itself they got onto a small electric cart which was commanded by Stanley. Travelling down the lengthy passageway 26 could feel the stares of the rebels they passed by. On each side were other corridors, branching far off into other areas of the complex.

"You sure know how to pick 'em don't you Alyx." jeered Harris as they rounded a corner, "No wonder you didn't get back until now, you were too busy coll-a-bo-rating!" he yelled as he drove them through the base. An obnoxious hyena laugh shrieked from Stanley and echoed around them. 26 shut them out of his mind entirely, focusing on his mud stained boots.

Alyx tentatively placed a palm on 26's arm, a silent "it'll be ok." 26 wasn't so confident. He could sense the anger, the confusion and the hate everyone gave him and even though he didn't show it pained

him to no end.

"Thanks," said 26. It wasn't Alyx though who replied but Harris.

"So you saved her life out there eh? Being a mindless slave too boring for you?"

"Nah, didn't you know? There are no chicks in the Combine." noted Stanley.

"Yeah there are," argued Harris. "They are used as assassins, Jonas told me."

"Jonas thinks Gordon Freeman is alive and living in Hawaii." said Stanley.

"That my friend is a great plan."

The cart's tires squeaked to a halt when they reached their destination, an old freight elevator, big enough to carry large numbers of people and equipment. A spinning red light above it indicated it was currently in motion, judging from the lack of the platform it was ascending towards them. Harris and Stanley both leapt out and took a peek down the shaft and groaned.

"Ah sh-great."

"What?" asked Alyx, seeing the "we're going to get into so much shit" expression on Stanley's face.

"The Major and her band of thugs are on the elevator." complained Harris. "Why d'you insist on pissing her off?"

"It's how she gets her kicks I imagine," offered Stanley in an unusually hostile tone. The elevator continued to rise until it thundered to a stop. Standing upon it were several men in Russian army gear, better armed than the standard Resistance members they'd seen on the way in. In the centre of the platform stood a single woman donning a woodland camouflage combat uniform, the infamous Major Morozov. Her piercing eyes were ones of a frozen blue, her skin was almost moonlight pale and her face was slightly sunken. The Major's jawline was sharp, ending with an almost V shaped chin. Atop her head she sported an auburn military crew hair cut, resulting in her more masculine appearance but still remained somewhat attractive.

She was only a few years older than Alyx, but unlike Alyx's kind spirited and warm personality, her's was cold and ruthless. She had inherited command of the base from her father, who had died several years ago. Whilst her father had been firm yet fair the Major was always tough on all her soldiers and even more so on the civilians within the base, earning a notorious reputation for being a hardass. Her cold, blue eyes bore into Alyx's, then burned upon sight of 26. In a flash her men all aimed at the former Combine, herself pulling out her own black 357 pistol from a shoulder holster.

"Would someone explain to me, why I have a Combine soldier in my base?" she demanded in a strong Russian accent.

Harris and Stanley backed to the side, "Alyx brought him here

Major."

"Yet you two let him in, unrestrained as well and against protocol!" she snapped angrily. "Get yourselves to your barracks, I shall have words with you later."

Without any hesitation the two men hurried off, while the Major took steps towards Alyx and 26.

"Miss Vance, you've finally decided to return." she sneered. She made no attempt to hide her own hatred of Eli Vance's daughter, a feeling that was somewhat mutual.

"I've been on the mission you assigned me. I got the data from the outpost."

"I sent you out there with a squad of my men, to assist you in your mission and you end up bringing back a Combine soldier instead. What the hell is wrong with you? Have you not considered the security risks?" the Major turned to look at 26, who merely stood staring back. "Why did you bring it with you?"

"He saved my life out there and helped me get back." Alyx drew closer in defiance. "I don't know about you, but I've never heard of a Combine soldier saving someone's life. He could have killed me out there, but he didn't. He helped me and wishes to join us."

"And what if he's just a spy, planted to gain your trust to take us all down?" spat the Major, still aiming. "Did you consider that? Did you consider the fact he could have tracking devices in him, leading the Combine here? Or that he could be an assassin?"

"I'm not with the Combine anymore, Major. My helmet was destroyed, I would be listed as dead." said 26 calmly. The Major nearly dropped her gun.

"You...can talk?" 26 nodded in response.

"Yes, and he can think as well. Look, Major I know you don't like the idea of a Combine being here, but this is the first time one of them have shown signs of humanity. He could be a vital asset to our cause, not to mention we could try and study ways of reversing the mind-wiping process. I'll keep him with me, he won't get in your way."

The Major's brow creased as she thought about the situation. She was furious at having a Combine soldier in her base, but she wasn't stupid. She kept it hidden but was actually stunned at seeing a maskless Combine, even more so at hearing he had saved Alyx's life and expressed a desire to join the Resistance. Already an idea was forming in her head, one she could potentially use to solidify her power over the well-known daughter of Eli Vance, who had always held more support with the Resistance than she did, often causing problems within the complex. She signalled her men to lower their guns as she did so with her own.

"I don't know whether you brought him here to help you in your travels or as a scientific curiosity." said the Major and replaced her revolver. "But the moment he tries anything, anything at all, and I'll blow a hole through your head before his. Are we clear?"

Alyx settled for silence, returning the hateful stare. The Major brushed past them both, followed by her men. She left, but not before adding "I want you to report to the level 4 cafeteria at 2000 hours sharp. _Both of you._"

26 followed Alyx onto the freight elevator and sighed. "That could have been worse."

"Don't worry about Morozov." Alyx reassured, "Let's get you settled first."

* * *

><p>Hours after 26 and Alyx arrived they were seated within the large canteen, where many other Resistance members had been gathered along with Morozov and her soldiers, who sat at their own table in front of everyone else. With help from Alyx, 26 had managed to find some old pre-war clothing for himself in attempt to, as Alyx put it re-humanize him. His combat vest had been replaced with a Russian bullet resistant vest, worn over a black leather jacket they'd managed to find. Around his neck he wore a dark blue scarf, conveniently covering up the metal implant in his neck and covering his head was a black woolly hat. His legs were covered by a pair of worn jeans and upon his feet were a pair of sturdy steel toe capped boots. The only part of his old uniform that he kept were his gloves, having washed them and cut off the fingers. Even with his new attire he could feel the looks of the people around him, regarding him with curiosity. It made him nervous and were it not for Alyx sitting next to him he'd have probably tried to get up and run.

"Don't worry," she whispered to him, "It'll be ok."

As the last of the Resistance members filed into the spacious room the Major raised her hands calling for silence, the continuous murmurs dying down.

"You are all aware," she began, pacing back and forth. "That for the past five months, we have been hosts of the renowned Alyx Vance. Three weeks ago she embarked on a critical assignment, accompanied by a team of 15 members of this very complex. A mission that was supposed to take only a maximum of three days, but stretched out much longer thanks to the efforts of the Combine."

The crowd remained silent and she continued, "Unfortunately for the team, the Combine learned of their location and sent several of their own teams in efforts to not only wipe it out and retrieve the data stolen, but to kill" she pointed to Alyx, "Miss Vance. Only three survivors made it back here."

Alyx's ears perked up. "Three?"

Morozov stood still, "Yes Miss Vance, three. James Calloway managed to arrive an hour after you did and is currently in the medical bay. But I did not gather you all here to talk about that. As you can see, Miss Vance herself made it back here as well, but not without the assistance of a third survivor, one who was not a part of our own team, but one of the enemy's."

The room erupted with noise as everyone began their own discussions.

The Major held up her own arms again, her presence enough to silence the crowd.

"I know what you are all thinking, but what I speak appears to be true. Friend of Miss Vance, stand up and present yourself."

26 felt Alyx grab his hand, effectively telling him not to do it. Blocking out his fears he stood up onto the table, elevating himself above everyone else where they could clearly see him, and after a brief moment removed his hat and scarf.

"Is that a Combine?"

"The hell is that doing here!"

"Shoot it already!"

"Nobody make a move!" yelled the Major as her men got up in alert. "Like I said, I know what you are thinking. But Miss Vance explained to me that this unmasked soldier saved her out there and with his help brought her back to base."

"He did!" Alyx yelled over the noise of the crowd, gaining their attention, "I found him without a mask and he could have killed me, but he didn't. Then after a zombie attacked me, he tackled it away from me and killed it. Without his help reading Pieter's map I would never have got back here either."

"It could be a spy!" a voice jeered.

"So could anyone else here!"

One of the citizens, a balding man in his fifties stood up. "You cannot be serious about letting that traitor to humanity stay here Major!"

"We should give him the chance!" argued Alyx. "I'll be responsible for him."

The older man ignored her and pointed an aggressive finger towards the major, "Your father would never have allowed such a breach of security!"

"My father is dead." retorted Morozov calmly, "I call the shots around here." her eyes swivelled to Alyx and 26. "You offer complete responsibility for his actions? You'd be willing to do such?"

Alyx stood on the table, taking position next to 26. "Yes, I do."

"So be it. He'll stay in your quarters for now, maybe once he can prove his loyalty to our cause he'll share our priviledges. Otherwise," Morozov made a dramatic pause, "He can make himself useful in the firing range." she finished darkly. "Now, back to your stations."

Many of the Resistance members were opposed, but with the Major backing (albeit reluctantly) Alyx's request they settled for quiet mumbling as they filtered out the room. Alyx and 26 were amongst the last and were about to retreat to see her friend Bailey when a gloved

hand grabbed his arm.

"I'll be watching you closely, as will my men. You understand this, if I find you're responsible for anything at all I won't hesitate to kill you myself."

"I understand." answered 26 neutrally. He didn't like being threatened, but he couldn't afford to give her any reasons to harm him, more importantly though he had to keep Alyx safe. The Major simply sniffed and moved on, giving Alyx a little sneer as she passed.

"She's a bitch, watch yourself," warned Alyx when the Major was out of earshot, then suddenly put on a cheerful smile, "Come on, let's go see Bailey."

Alyx walked off ahead and 26 followed, apprehensive about meeting this Bailey, and whether he'd be causing more trouble than it was worth.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: Yes, I've finally written another chapter. I find it hard to write at times, so I leave it and either don't get ideas on continuing it for ages or other commitments keep me busy. I intended to introduce Morozov as a direct opposite to Alyx, so I intend to write from her own perspective from time to time. I also added her, Stanley and Harris as a contrast to the rebels found in Half Life 2, who are far too cheery and friendly a lot of the time in my opinion. Please review and let me know what you think
:-)
**

End
file.